



## The Dutch conservative revolution: the consequences for Europe

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ARI Nº 10-2002 - 30.5.2002

After the terrorist attacks of 11 September, the United States have become more inward-looking and more sentimentally patriotic. Videos of unsavoury characters like Osama bin Laden have given rise to fears of the unknown and strengthened the call for a return to "American values". Although responsible policymakers have carefully avoided any hint of anti-Islamic sentiment, the return of values and culture as essential and core elements of national identity are part of a wave of conservative thinking that now also seems to have reached Europe.

Since the Netherlands was widely seen as the bastion of liberal—even libertarian—thinking, it came as quite a shock that this country seemed ready to follow the conservative populist Pim Fortuyn in the parliamentary elections of 15 May. Mr. Fortuyn's concoction of nationalism and conservatism, all served up with remarkable flair and audacity, proved attractive to a significant section of the Dutch electorate (17.1%). They were not mainly angry, white, middle-class men, but included all sections of Dutch society, even a significant portion of non-white voters who seemed keen to put a halt to further immigration since this could undermine their economic position. After Mr. Fortuyn's assassination at the hands of a (certainly angry and white) environmental radical only a week before the elections, a shock went through the Netherlands and Europe. What was happening in the Netherlands? Was this model of consensus-building (the so-called Poldermodel) falling apart? Was Mr. Fortuyn's rise part of a wider European shift towards the right and just another link in the chain of Haider-Le Pen-Berlusconi that seems keen to build a Fortress Europe in order to keep the great unwashed safely outside Europe's borders?

It is clear that the upsurges in conservative attitudes all around Europe tend to focus on the issue of immigration and the combined ideas that the flood of immigrants and asylum-seekers are threatening economic prosperity and national identity. The simple fact that in a decade or two the majority of the population of Dutch cities will have non-Dutch roots is considered a source of concern. Where the most popular name for boys in the Netherlands used to be Jan, it is now Muhammad. Mainstream political parties—whether classical left or right—have shied away from openly and honestly discussing these concerns and have thus failed to develop policies to address them. Mr. Fortuyn's star could only rise because he made these issues the core of his political programme. As a real populist, his "solutions" were overly simplistic and difficult to realise. For example, he suggested that the Netherlands should leave the Schengen-regime and return to a purely national policy on immigration, visas and registration-cum-control of foreigners. He also proposed that the Netherlands should organise a national referendum on the enlargement of the European Union (EU), so that the Dutch people could make up their mind about the merit of taking in more countries.

Mr. Fortuyn's movement (modestly called "Lijst Pim Fortuyn", of LPF), was the big winner of the parliamentary elections. With 26 seats (in a 150-seat Lower House of Parliament), the LPF has become a major player, although its raggle-taggle structure and maverick character make it an uncertain factor in Dutch politics. The Christian Democrats (CDA), under the leadership of its new party chairman Jan Peter Balkenende, have been the other victors with a surprising 43 seats. The new coalition will be formed together with the conservative-liberal party VVD, who actually lost the elections (from 38 to 24 seats), but without whose participation a right-wing coalition would be unmanageable. What does this shift to the right mean for the role of the Netherlands in the EU (and Europe at large), and how will it affect Dutch politics and policies towards Europe?

The conservative shift in Dutch politics reflects the disconcert and uncertainty of the Netherlands about its place and role in both Europe and the wider world. The moorings and clichés of the past no longer hold. The Netherlands used to be both a staunch ally of the US within NATO and—as a founding member of the EU—one of the firmest supporters of further European integration. With the end of the Cold War, the departure from the Dutch guilder, the development of a European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), and the prospect of both NATO and EU enlargement, it has become increasingly unclear how Dutch national interests should be formulated and protected. Traditional sacred cows had already gradually lost their virtuous qualities, and may now well be unceremoniously slaughtered by the current government. This should not be qualified as revolutionary per se, but as testimony that the Netherlands, like many other EU member states, is in a reflective mood, reconsidering its roots and minding its core business of optimizing its national interests.

Europe should therefore expect a more nationalistic Dutch attitude which will be reflected, amongst others, in less support for the (supranational) European Commission, and more for the (intergovernmental) Council of Ministers. As a small country with a medium-sized economy, the Netherlands has much to lose financially. In an enlarged EU, the Netherlands may be out-voted too frequently for comfort, especially on sensitive issues like immigration and asylum, on agriculture and transportation, and on key issues such as fiscal and budgetary policy. With much to lose financially and politically, the Netherlands will want to have a stronger say on how to share the EU's cake and with whom. In particular, the financial consequences of EU enlargement will be carefully screened by any new Dutch government, and additional obstacles may be created for applicant countries whose membership of the Union would damage the Netherlands' economy. At the same time, The Hague will certainly not give the Commission a carte blanche on the now totally obsolete understanding that only the Commission can defend the interests of the EU's smaller member states.

The most likely coalition is a centre-right cabinet formed by the CDA, LPF and VVD, led by Jan Peter Balkenende.

The LPF now calls for a general coalition agreement which leaves sufficient room for debate on policy issues amongst the coalition partners, as well as in parliament. This is a departure from previous practice, where a very detailed coalition agreement assured relatively friction-free government at the price of the quality of debate in parliament. Under these changed circumstances, the Netherlands' policy towards Europe will be more eclectic and hence less predictable. Although the governing parties are all to the conservative/right of the political spectrum, their attitudes and affection for things European are as mixed as can be.

The CDA under Balkenende will no doubt be the most Europhile. Balkenende himself has made many pro-European remarks, even calling for a EU along federal lines in order to defend European values and interests. The VVD traditionally calls for modest European integration as long as the economic and financial benefits are clear. It came as no surprise that a few weeks before the elections, the VVD leader Hans Dijkstal even questioned the economic merits of EU enlargement. The VVD also calls for a more stringent Dutch policy on immigration and asylum, and hence for a stronger role of the EU since this goal can only be achieved by Europe and through measures at the European level. As the new kid on the Dutch political bloc, the LPF will remain an unknown quantity for the coming months. If Fortuyn's books are read as the LPF's informal party programme, this would make this party the most Eurosceptic of the coalition. Fortuyn had frequently called for the abolition of the European Parliament, the renationalisation of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), more controls on goods and persons on the EU's internal borders, quitting the Schengen agreement, as well as turning the EU into a club of sovereign states rather than aiming towards a federal Europe. According to the late Fortuyn, a true democracy can only be achieved on the national level, and not in a European context.

The new Dutch coalition therefore covers a relatively wide spectrum of policy towards Europe. One can only speculate in which direction Dutch policy will go on individual issues. Given that even under the previous Dutch governments a more critical attitude towards the EU was taking shape, European partners may want to get used to a more conservative Netherlands, less prepared and willing than before to engage itself fully in continued European integration. On the other hand, given the LPF's political greenness and lack of practical experience in the difficult process of Dutch government-by-coalition, it remains likely that even Fortuyn's followers will be prepared to compromise for the sake and glory of political power. The Dutch political system remains remarkably stable, even after the conservative shake-up of last May. Clearly, it will have the flexibility and strength to accommodate young Turks like the LPF, not only on domestic matters, but also on issues of European policy.

This does not mean that on some issues the LPF will not want to put a clear and recognizable stamp on the Netherlands' policy towards Europe. This became clear immediately after the elections, when the present LPF leader Mat Herben called for the reshuffling of the Dutch representation in the Convention on the future of the EU. Herben complained that Hans van Mierlo (who is generally considered to be the spiritual father of the so-called Purple-government which has ruled the Netherlands the last eight years) is no longer an acceptable spokesman for the Netherlands in the Convention, and should be replaced by someone more in line with the contemporary Dutch political temperament. Other key decisions, such as the future replacement of the ageing F16 fighter aircraft, are also likely to hinge upon the LPF. Herben, who has worked with the Dutch Ministry of Defence for two decades, seems keen to put the LPF's weight behind the US Joint Strike Fighter (JSF). This would shift the Netherlands slightly more to the US military-industrial camp, although it would be an exaggeration to read any Euroscepticism into such a (possible) decision: a good-quality Dutch airforce would be a bonus for any international force, be it led by NATO or the EU.

The conservative mood in the Netherlands therefore reflects not so much scepticism towards the EU, but a reflection on the role and place of the country in Europe and the world. By voting for the LPF, the electorate has called for a time-out, rather than a stop, or even a U-turn. That this sentiment is widely shared across Europe and reflected in a more conservative shift in countries such as Denmark, Norway, Italy, Spain, France and perhaps in future Germany, indicates that EU member states are in the process of redefining their role. Should they continue on the rollercoaster of EU federalism and happily shed their sovereignty? Is "Europe" really the only option to guard their security and guarantee their prosperity in times of globalisation? Even if this is really the case, mainstream political parties will have to explain to their electorate better than before why they should sustain their commitment to the European project. Obviously, even a well-off country like the Netherlands has a surprisingly big reservoir of discontents that are more than willing to vote for someone who promises "change" and a return to the "Dutch roots" (whatever they are). When (not if) the economic downturn becomes reality, the soil for these emotions will become more fertile and anti-European feeling will inevitably grow in a commensurate way.

The conclusion should therefore be clear: the EU should take serious steps to become more relevant to "its" citizens; it should explain what it does and why; it should make a consolidated effort to "sell" itself to the people in order to create an emotional relationship with those who are confronted with its policies. This is now also realized by European political leaders like Gerhard Schröder, José María Aznar, Tony Blair, as well as EU officials (e.g. Prodi and Verheugen). They have made it clear that the EU should be sensitive to the call for more effective and stringent immigration and asylum policies in a consolidated effort to keep voters away from the extreme right. This is also the key task of the new Dutch government. It also implies that the Dutch conservative revolution is very likely to peter out sooner rather than later; Dutch political culture being—luckily—too boring and bland to sustain a continuous level of high emotions. But if even the Netherlands, this emblem of moderation and common sense, is susceptible to populism and Euroscepticism, the future of a European federation-of-sorts looks bleaker than ever. And not even the latest Commission proposal can change this reality.

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